

Tips for Reducing Test Anxiety

By: Wayne Hurr, Ph.D., College Psychologist

Most students who take a test experience some anxiety. But for some students, the feeling is so intense that it affects their performance. Anxiety can cause difficulty in concentration and prevent us from recalling material that we have learned. A student who is experiencing test anxiety may do poorly on an exam even if he or she knows the material better than a classmate who is able to control anxiety. However, there are things that each of us can do to prevent and counteract test anxiety:

1. **Get a good night's rest before the exam.** Do not try to stay up all night by taking caffeine or drugs. You are likely to feel tired, irritable, and distracted by the time of the exam.
2. **Eat moderate breakfast or lunch,** but avoid drinks with caffeine.
3. **Steer clear of fellow students who get tense.** Panic is contagious.
4. **Get to the exam room a few minutes** early so you will have a chance to familiarize yourself with the surroundings.
5. **Budget your time.** Estimate how much time you have to answer each question. If some questions are worth more points than others, plan to spend more time answering them.
6. **Answer the easiest questions first.** Mark difficult items and return to them after. Don't dwell on any particular question. You may come up with the answer as you work on a different question.
7. **Make a brief outline.** On essay questions, instead of plunging right in, take a few minutes to organize your thoughts, make a brief outline and then start off with a summary sentence.
8. **Don't create disastrous scenarios for yourself** or put your whole future on the line with a single test. It is unlikely that one test will "make or break" your chances for a happy or successful future. Learn to imagine yourself remaining calm and in control. Use your imagination in a positive way and cast yourself in the role of a winner, not a loser.
9. **Learn to recognize the underlying causes of your anxiety.** Think about why you become anxious. Recognize that some thoughts are negative and self-defeating. For each emotional, frightening thought, come up with a rational counter-thought.
10. **Practice relaxation techniques.**
If your mind is blocked by tension during an exam, close your eyes, take a long, deep breath, and then let it out slowly. Concentrate on your breathing and actually **feel** or **hear** yourself breathe. Don't allow yourself to worry about the time, test, or tension.
Repeat this twice, then return to the test.

Some students may find **muscle tension-relaxation exercises** helpful. If before or during a test you start to panic, stretch as hard as you can, tensing the muscles in your arms and legs, then suddenly relax all of them. This will help relieve tension. If you have more time, tighten and then relax the different muscle groups and then relax those muscles for 10-20 seconds. Follow

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the same procedure for muscles in your shoulder, neck, chest, abdomen, legs, feet, etc. remember to breathe deeply and slowly. Relaxation techniques are most effective when they are used on a regular daily basis as a preventative measure. It is therefore recommended that students use them **before** exams.